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Eating Garbage Graciously : Verbatim Theatre and Improvisation

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Eating Garbage Graciously:
Verbatim Theatre and Improvisation
An Honors College Thesis

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Abstract

Improvisation and verbatim theatre are two forms of theatrical performance that are distinct from each other in format and style, but can be combined to create a dynamic new form of performance. In this paper, I address how my personal experience with improvisation, or improv, led me on a journey to create my own long-form improv format, “The Vermando”. This paper details its use in my honors performance thesis, *Eating Garbage Graciously*. My original improv format, “The Vermando”, bridges together rehearsed verbatim theatre pieces and improvised performances to unleash a hybrid theatrical performance that uses improv to explore the stories of various human beings.

Keywords: Improvisation, Verbatim Theatre, Armando, Devised Theatre, Failure, Playback Theatre.

Introduction

Improvisation is the theatrical art-form of creating performance on the spot. A theatrical improv show consists of improvisers and an audience. The improvisers will take a suggestion from the audience, and inspired from the suggestion they will create improvised scenes. Popular suggestions improvisers ask for are locations, relationships, activities, occupations or some simply ask for a random word. With nothing more than this random word, the improviser will take the suggestion and start creating a scene. For example, the suggestion could be “tooth.” An improviser might start this scene by acting as the tooth fairy coming to collect teeth, or maybe they will play a dentist who is performing a root canal, or maybe they’re a person who finds a tooth in their dinner at a restaurant, or maybe that improviser just becomes the character of a tooth and their scene partner is their neighbor the tongue who they are having a fight with. Whichever one of these “tooth” inspired scenarios takes place, each is a theatrical improv performance. I believe this art-form's lack of predictability is what sets it apart from other theatre performance. Not knowing what is going to happen and embracing it is the magical experience of improv. Through my improv training and my training at Post Theatre Company, I bridged together rehearsed verbatim theatre and improvised performance to unleash a hybrid theatrical performance that uses improv to explore the stories of various human beings.

iO Chicago 2017 Summer Intensive

In the summer of 2017 I studied long-form improvisation at iO Chicago (Improv Olympic) for five weeks during the month of July. I came into this experience thinking that I needed to instill some fun into my life—not only for my theatre career, but also for my mental health. The summer after my sophomore year at LIU (Long Island University) was a pivotal

moment for me to come to terms with my mental health. Sophomore year had been hard for me because I was in a constant state of mind where I felt like I needed to prove myself: my acting work was effortful, I put high standards on myself unnecessarily, and overall I worked myself too hard.

After I forced myself to sign up for iO's five week summer intensive, terror filled my body. I was nervous to go to Chicago for five weeks to study long-form improv for the first time, with a bunch of people I had never met before. Even though I enjoyed it, was an art-form that scared me at the time. At this point in my improv career I had only done short-form improv in high school and I was also in a short-form troupe with LIU's student ran club E.S.T.A (Emerging Student Theatre Artists) called "No Control". In hindsight, joining "No Control" in my freshman year of college allowed me to gain confidence in myself, and ultimately, helped me to assimilate to college.

I feel like I discovered my personal identity by being exposed to people who brought different life experiences when I studied at iO. The 2017 intensive had over 80 students, and these students were of all ages and from all over the world. The 80 students were divided into 9 sections of about 14-15 people per section. Throughout the entire intensive I was with the same 14 people. Each week offered a new level of iO's long-form improv curriculum and we got a new iO teacher each week. Each section went through the same course as the other sections, but some of the exercises were different depending on what teacher you had. In my class, there were more international citizens than American citizens. My exposure to other cultures in improv was a fundamental part of my improv training in Chicago. The foundation of my improv training was

cultivated through improvising with people where English was their second language, and my exposure to other cultures in improv shaped the way I created my thesis performance.

Improvisation is huge in other countries and Chicago is known as the biggest improv city in the world (Halpern 3). The international students came to this intensive to get the full Chicago improv experience (Eckstein). In both of my summers in Chicago, I have worked with improvisers from Warsaw, Poland; London, England; and Sydney, Australia. In each of these cities, most of the improvisers know each other. Each city, while populous, has a small close-knit improv/comedy community, and in my two summers in Chicago I met improvisers who knew the friends from that city that I had made the previous year. The close-knit nature of these communities speaks to the nature of improv itself. It's an art-form that brings people of all types together. I was the youngest person in my section at iO. It initially shocked me that the ages of the student's in my class ranged from 20-40. I came into this intensive having so much ignorance on the world of improvisation. Coming in blind was the best way for me to benefit from this experience. My lack of knowledge, enabled me to absorb the content because I had no preconceived notions of what the experience would be.

Originally I had planned for my performance thesis to be an improv show, but after I found verbatim theatre in my research that plan changed. Verbatim theatre is a form of theatre that is constructed by the precise words spoken by people interviewed about a particular event or topic (Paget 1). As soon as I stumbled across verbatim theatre I realized my performance thesis could be a manifestation of the theatre actor part of me, and use theatre as an anchor to unveil the newer part of myself that has been created with my discovery of improv.

Verbatim Theatre: Anna Deavere Smith

Anna Deavere Smith helped pioneer verbatim theatre. Her first work, *Fires in The Mirror*, investigated the implications of the Crown Heights riots. Deavere Smith uses mimesis, as she physically embodies the people she interviews. Mimesis is the imitation or reproduction of the words of another, in order to represent that person's character. For *Fires in the Mirror*, Deavere Smith interviewed people directly and indirectly affected by the riots. In 1991, Crown Heights was racially divided between Hasidic Jews and African Americans. When a Jewish man drove onto the sidewalk and killed a 7-year old black boy, it incited these communities to riot against each other. The African-American Community protested the delayed response in medical help for the boy, and soon after this incident, Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish Rabbinical student visiting from Australia, was fatally injured by a group of black youths. Deavere Smith uses the words of 26 people, including writers, politicians, and religious leaders to extrapolate the idea of "the struggle of being together in our differences" (Schechner 1). Deavere Smith's work with *Fires in the Mirror* received a lot of critical acclaim and was a finalist for the Pulitzer prize. *Fires in the Mirror* was Deavere Smith's breakthrough work that sparked discussion on personal identity, how people respond to those different from themselves, and how barriers between cultures can be breached (Schechner 1).Page Break

The Second City Chicago, iO Chicago, The Annoyance, The Magnet

Part of the research of my training at iO included the opportunity to see performances regularly. One of the shows I saw during this time was at the Annoyance Theatre and it was called "Sad Clown". This long-form improv show used improv to explore 3 stories that were all different experiences of dealing with mental illness. The performance consisted of one person

telling a story that they had pre-written, and after that a group of improvisers would improvise scenes based off details that stuck out to them from the story. The purpose of the improv was not to use people's personal experiences to make jokes, but to use improv to promote relatability and make light of the mental illnesses.

There were three stories through the course of the show and after each story a 15-20 minute set of improv followed with content inspired from the stories. The first story was a woman's experience with social anxiety, the second was a woman's struggle through an eating disorder, and the third story was a man who struggled his whole life with Asperger's. After seeing this show and experiencing how improv could be used to explore serious themes, I knew that this was what I wanted to do for my performance thesis. Sad Clown and the summer iO intensive gave me the confidence to create a thesis that focused on improv. Since my first experience at iO, I have now taken classes at The Second City Chicago, The Annoyance Chicago, and The Magnet in New York City. Each improv theatre has its own philosophy on what techniques make for a good improvised performance. I personally have absorbed all of these programs' training and have taken the philosophies that I have best retained to create my improv identity.

In Chicago, The Second City, iO, and The Annoyance are referred to as the mind, heart, and X-factor of improvised performance. There is no branding or published work that describes these theatres as the mind, heart, and X-factor. The mind, heart, and X-factor metaphor was described to me during a workshop I did with Rachael Mason from The Second City Chicago. The classification of these theatres as the mind, heart, and x-factor is just a known metaphor in the Chicago improv community. The Second City uses improv as a tool to create comedic

content. Improv is used to create sketch revues that contain improvised sections, but Second City shows mainly consists of a rehearsed performance that stays the same. The Second City is referred to as the mind because its use of improv is academic in that improv is used as a writing tool to create content (Field).

iO uses improv for performance and not as a content generator. When studying at iO, you are taught skills that make it so you can improvise a performance and it can still hold the value that a planned and well-rehearsed theatre performance has. iO teaches you to improvise from a place of self, in which comedy comes from the ability to relate to daily situations. It is known as the heart because its rooted in truth and only uses improv to create performance (Halpern 5). There are several rules that are generally accepted at most improv theatres, at the Annoyance, they teach you to let these rules go. The Annoyance teaches you to only accept what you wish to accept. They deny the significance in the popular improv concept of “Yes, and”. “Yes, and” is a phrase that serves as the main rule of all improvised performance. “Yes, and” means to accept the reality that has been set up for you while also adding to that reality. With the Annoyance philosophy, you don’t have to accept a reality that someone else has set up for you. Their philosophy focuses on bringing two fully fleshed out characters together and merging their realities. The Annoyance’s rejection of “Yes, and”, make them the X-factor of the three biggest improv theatres in Chicago (Ashley).

I’ve only had New York Improv training from the Magnet. Magnet’s philosophy is about taking your own life experience and putting it into your improv, and their musical improv training is what sets them apart from all the other improv theatres in the United States. They are one of the few improv theatres in the country that have musical improv house teams who

perform at The Magnet on a weekly basis. In a musical improv course at The Magnet, one learns how to improvise musical numbers such as an opening number, trio, tagline song, and songs that contain both a chorus and a verse. A tagline song is a song where a certain phrase repeats throughout it multiple times. An example of this would be the song, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* from *The Wizard of Oz*. This is a tagline song because the phrase, “somewhere over the rainbow” is repeated multiple times. Magnet’s musical improv training is significant because it is one of the few musical improv courses that goes into depth about the process of creating different types of improvised musical numbers (Chase).

Studying at these improv theaters has not only made me a better improviser, but studying from four different theatres has also made me a better actor. Part of an actor’s job is to have the ability to take direction and make changes on a moment’s notice, and with improv training, I not only had to make changes on the spot but I also had to change the technique I used to improvise. For example, at The Annoyance you are taught to come into an improv scene with a fully fleshed out character and not to define your relationship to your scene partner until you know what character they have brought into the scene (Ashley). Not being able to name my scene partner from the start of the scene was a challenging adjustment I had to make in my improv technique. I was not only making up a scene as I went but I was also changing how I went about making up that scene. If there was more improvisation in actor training, then actors could use their ability to adjust their work to meet a director’s vision.

Through my training at these theatres and through research, I picked an improv performance structure that would not only display all the skills I’ve learned in improv, but also feature the skills I’ve learned as an actor. I believe improv training and theatre training should

not be separate entities. Through my training at Post Theatre Company, I've learned how to take any piece of text, activate it, and connect to it personally. I wanted my acting training to meet my improv training in my thesis. I created a piece that could combine both rehearsed theatre acting and unrehearsed improv performance. This creation enabled me to define that an actor, improviser, and theatre-maker is the kind of artist I've become through my collegiate experience. By combining theatre and improv together, my performance thesis became a hybrid of verbatim Theatre and The *Armando* (a form of long-form improv) launching, the *Vermando*.

The Armando

The *Armando* is a long-form improv structure for improvised performance that was invented by Armando Diaz in 1995 at the iO "ImprovOlympic" theatre in Chicago (Halpern 3). Armando Diaz now owns The Magnet improv theatre in New York City. The structure of the *Armando* is the longest running improv structure in improv performance. The *Armando* uses a team of improvisers and a guest monologist. The monologist gets a suggestion from the audience and from that suggestion, the monologist associates it to a personal anecdote that they describe to the audience. One time when I was the monologist I got the suggestion "Lake". I associated the word, "lake" by relating to a time when my family and I spent Christmas at my Aunt's lake-home. We had a "white elephant" gift exchange, however, my mom messed up and ended up getting a bunch of Starbucks and Target gift cards making Christmas a bit awkward. (A white elephant gift is a gift that is amusing but impractical. It is an exchange of "gag" gifts) After I had established that I spent Christmas at my aunt's lake home, I went on telling the story for about 3-5 minutes. The length of the monologue can vary depending upon how long the performance is. Usually shorter monologues are told for shorter performances and longer monologues are

told for longer performances. A usual *Armando* show is about an hour long. After the monologist finishes their story, the improvisers start to create improv scenes based off details that stuck out to them in the story. If one tried to pull from my “lake” story, they might start a scene that takes place Christmas morning, or they could be giving their significant other a Starbucks gift card, another scene could take place at a lake—whatever the scene is, it just has to be inspired from what was heard in the monologist’s improvised story (Chase).

In a typical hour-long *Armando* show, the monologist does 3 monologues through the course of an hour and along with each monologue is a twenty-minute set of improv scenes inspired from the monologue that went before it. The *Armando* is a cycle of three. After the first story and a 15-20 minute set, the monologist tells another story inspired by a detail they pulled from the set of scenes that just happened. For example, if there actually was a scene from my original “lake” suggestion where someone gave their significant other a Starbucks gift card, maybe that gift card led to the couple breaking up, then in the second cycle I would be inspired tell a story about the worst breakup I’ve ever had. I was inspired to tell a breakup story because of the break-up scene that happened in the first set of scenes. After this story, another 15-20 minute set of scenes would happen inspired from my “break-up” story. After this set of scenes, I would return to the stage for a third cycle to share a final monologue inspired by the last set of scenes, and another 15-20 minute set of scenes would follow. The show would end the third cycle of monologue/20 minute set of scenes.

During this show, there is a light board operator who watches the show along with the audience. They are as much of an improviser as the performers on stage because they get to decide at which point the show should end. A light board operator ends an improv show by

simply blacking out the lights when they see a good ending to a scene. This is a skillset that requires expertise because it can be awkward if the improvisers are in the middle of a scene and all of sudden the light board operator blacks out too early. It can leave an audience frustrated that they didn't get to see any kind of resolution or ending. A lot of the time, light board operators at famous improv theatres like iO or The Magnet are also improvisers because they have the skillset to know when to properly end scenes. An ending to an improv scene usually happens when there's a transformation made in the scene that would be a strong moment to end on. So for example, a typical ending to an improv set would be when two characters decide to get married. This is a good ending because it's a relationship transformation and leaves the audience with a resolution. For my thesis, *Eating Garbage Graciously* (EGG), I was lucky enough that my stage manager was calling the cues. My stage manager, Emma Kocar, had been present at all my rehearsals and sometimes she would get up and improvise with the rest of the cast. She was by my side throughout the entire rehearsal process, so it was beneficial that she also had the control over the blackout that would end the show.

Playback Theatre

In creating the *Vermando*, I considered the possibility of using Playback Theatre in my performance. Originally, I thought my thesis performance would reflect the format of the "Sad Clown" improv show, but that changed once I started doing more research and found Playback Theatre. Playback Theatre is a form of theatre that is used to bring a community together by performing an event that actually happened. There is a large Playback Theatre community in Cuba called Teatro Comunitario. Teatro Comunitario created the Cuban Playback Project which was dedicated to those living with HIV/AIDS (Meer 2). This community consists of AIDS

victims who were separated from society into mandatory HIV/AIDS sanatoriums. Through their battle with AIDS, these victims had intense and tragic stories that were suppressed due to their separation from society. Playback Theatre helped to heal communities and exist as a forum where Cuban communities could express their struggles in public (Meer 2).

Playback Theatre exists as a tool to inspire communication in communities. The format of a Playback includes: the setup, the enactment, and the check back. The setup is where the actors receive information from an audience member, and this information can be a personal anecdote or a statement of how they feel. The enactment is where the actors physically act out the scene, and the check back is where the actors “check back” with the audience member after the performance. The check back is the most important part of the performance because that’s when the audience member can react to the performance. By watching the audience member react to their story, the community is able to relate to the audience member’s experience fully. The mission of the Playback Theatre is to create improvised scenes and provoke a community that listens and understands universal human experiences (Fox 1). Playback theatre is an art-form that incorporates improv and acting into one performance. Through my research, I started to envision how my thesis could manifest, inspired by Playback’s healing of Cuban communities. Playback Theatre led me to find verbatim Theatre because of its common thread of taking stories from real people and bringing them to life.

The Vermando

My thesis became a hybrid of both verbatim Theatre and *The Armando*. The mashup of verbatim Theatre and *The Armando* enabled me to coin the verbatim Theatre/Long-form Improv format *The Vermando*. A *Vermando* takes the scripted text of a verbatim piece and uses it as

inspiration to create improvised performance. In a *Vermando*, there's a team of improvisers who have all prepared two verbatim acting pieces. Each verbatim acting piece is rehearsed ahead of time, and the name of the person who originated the text is written on a sheet of paper. All of these sheets of paper, which each have the name of a different verbatim piece, are put into a bucket for an audience member to pick from. The verbatim piece that is drawn is the piece that's performed, the performer has no idea that their piece is being performed until their piece is drawn by an audience member. All they know is what verbatim piece is theirs so they can be ready to perform it whenever or if ever their piece is drawn. The rest of the cast listens to the piece that's chosen, similarly to the improvisers who listen to the improvised monologue in an *Armando*, and once the piece is finished, they improvise scenes based off of details that stuck out during the piece. The purpose of the improv in a *Vermando* is not to recreate the story of the verbatim piece, but to expand upon the themes of it, this is the same case in *The Armando*.

Verbatim Piece Selections

Unlike a traditional verbatim piece, the actors did not use mimesis to physically and mentally embody their characters like Anna Deavere Smith, they worked in a way that enabled them to serve as a vessel in which a person's story was being told. This is different because in Deavere Smith's case she truly becomes the people in her verbatim pieces. My cast was trying to tell people's stories without physically and mentally becoming their people. My cast used research to adapt their person's physicality but they did not have a goal of physically becoming their person on stage. There were five people in the cast and each person prepared two verbatim pieces, which I took from TED radio or interviews from magazines and YouTube. I selected these pieces based off of questionnaires that I sent the cast while also considering pieces that

illustrate ideals that I have taken from my experience with Improv. The questionnaire that I gave the actors is located in the appendix of this paper (pg. 35). The questionnaire allowed me to select pieces in which the cast could identify with and be excited about. It was important for me to cast a variety of individuals to create an improv ensemble and also be able to represent different points of view. Since a big part of my improv experience was being exposed to different cultures, I wanted the commonalities and relatability that I experienced with these cultures to manifest in the performance.

Improv has a universal appeal because improvising with other people and forcing yourselves to make things up on the spot gives you a common goal, which ultimately creates a bond between people. The bond that I created with my international friends, exposed me to their diverse points of view ultimately inspiring me to select diverse verbatim pieces for *The Vermando*. Creating the questionnaire helped me to look for material for each specific actor in mind. I picked verbatim pieces from people I had never heard of as well as from famous artists. I thought it was important to bring voice to points of view that recognizable to me but also give voice to points of views who are not recognizable. I picked half of the artists (Marilyn Monroe, Joni Mitchell, Jon Bellion, and Stephen Sondheim) because they're notable in pop culture, and I picked the other half (Simone Giertz, Ingrid Fetell Lee, Janine Shepherd, Janine DiGiovanni, and Christy C. Road) because they were not as notable to me.

It was a long process to find verbatim text that I thought would fit my actors while also relating them to themes I took away from my own improv experience. I picked the verbatim pieces by looking for material that covered the themes of: failing gracefully, defining identity, and finding joy. Before I had improv training, I was anxious. My will to get things right was so

strong that it actually hindered me in finding success. When I learned to fail graciously, my anxiety started to decrease and my personal identity shifted. When I embraced the parts of myself that I thought made me “fail,” I was my true self. I believe the act of improv, the community around it, and the kind of performance it creates are what made me the person I am today.

In total, I read through 40 verbatim pieces. Eventually I narrowed 40 down to 15 pieces, which I would give the cast to choose from. Each actor had their own pool of 3 pieces to pick from as a part of the total 15 pieces. Once the actors picked their favorite two pieces the third piece went into a folder that would later be used as a rehearsal verbatim piece. Rehearsal verbatim pieces were used during the last week of the process so the actors could practice the structure of the *Vermando* while saving their verbatim pieces for the actual performances. The 10 pieces I ended up with for the entire ensemble were: Joni Mitchell, Janine Shepherd (Irene Poole), Christy C. Road, Ingrid Fetell Lee (Anastacia “Yaya” Munoz), Bethany Yellowtail, Jon Bellion (Zachary Villa), Stephen Sondheim, Janine DiGiovanni (Lauren Bobeck), Simone Giertz, and Marilyn Monroe (Morgan Bailey). In picking these pieces for each actor, I crafted it so everyone had two pieces that greatly contrasted with the other. For example, I gave Anastacia “Yaya” Munoz “Christy C. Road” and “Ingrid Fetell Lee”. Christy is a queer Latina illustrator who is in a punk band and is obsessed with Green Day, and Ingrid Fetell Lee is a writer who writes about the aesthetics of joy shedding light on our relationship between human emotions and the environment. By picking pieces that contrast with one another, I was able to create

potential for a diverse set of improv inspirations in the *Vermando* while also being able to stretch the actors and have them grow through this process.

Direction

I have a lot of experience directing improv but I have never directed scripted theatre before. I manage a short-form improv troupe through Long Island University's student-ran club E.S.T.A. (Emerging Student Theatre Artists) called "No Control". We rehearse on a weekly basis and have a performance about every month of the school year, so teaching Improv is something I'm comfortable with and getting better at. I was a bit nervous about directing the verbatim pieces because I don't have any experience directing plays, and I was nervous about how they look next to the improv work. In my directing, I was able to take skills that I have learned through my training at Post Theatre Company and share them with my cast. A lot of the time monologues in scripts will be a part of a bigger arc of a story so they have a distinct function that they are serving. Knowing this function and having an entire play to work off of helps actors in their performance practices. Since the monologues in my piece were verbatim pieces, I had to have the actors work on them differently than they would work on a monologue from a play.

When actors work on scripted plays, they find the contextual clues about the character via given circumstances. Given circumstances are facts that are provided by the playwright as well as imagined by the actor. It is the total set of environmental and situational conditions that influence a character's actions. Since the verbatim pieces are taken from real human beings, the actors were able to develop given circumstances for their work by doing research on the person whose words were their verbatim piece. For example, Morgan Bailey had a Marilyn Monroe text for one of her pieces. She worked on this text by researching videos of Marilyn in interviews and

analyzing how Marilyn talked, as well as her physicality. I directed the actors to work with an awareness of antithesis. In an actor's textual analysis, antithesis work is a process of looking for images or ideas that juxtapose each other. I instructed the actors to work with antithesis because having an awareness of ideas that clash helps the actor decide how their character feels about the two different images. In Morgan's Marilyn piece, some antithesis that I brought to her attention was in the line "I'll never forget that one day he said I should act on the stage and how the people standing around laughed. But he said, 'No, I'm very serious.'" I directed Morgan to have an awareness of the image of the people laughing at the idea of Marilyn being an actor versus the image of Arthur Miller seriously telling her she should act on stage. Once Morgan was able to identify the antithesis in these sentences, she was able to have a clearer way of communicating to the audience the importance of Marilyn's relationship to Arthur Miller and her struggle in rising to fame.

As an actor, my experience in directing my thesis taught me a lot about acting as well as directing. When I've been directed to have an awareness of textual clues, as an actor, I've been able to see their use in performance. As a director, I'm able to see how this awareness not only has use but is truly fundamental in activating the text and compelling the listener. When Morgan was directed to use antithesis, and her work changed due to that awareness, it made me see how text analysis is imperative in an actor's process. The act of giving actors feedback and seeing them implement the feedback on the spot as a director is also informative to me as an actor. A lot of times in acting you present your piece, you get feedback on it, and you do the piece again trying to implement the feedback that you've just received. As an actor, having to make changes in the moment, which could negate all of the work you've done before, is one of the hardest

challenges. An actor could be up all night trying to work on the repetition of a certain sound in their piece, and the next day if the director doesn't like it, the actor has to change it immediately. I found that moving from ensemble improv rehearsals to one on one rehearsals helped the actors with implementing changes. When I would see an actor tense up because they were trying to implement a note I gave them, I would instruct them to bring one of their goofy choices, from the improv portion of rehearsal, into their verbatim piece. It was nice having just seen them be free and make choices in a rehearsal just minutes prior and then showing them how they could bring that freedom into their verbatim acting work.

A skill in an actor's textual analysis work, is to use voice and speech techniques as a tool to activate the text. This involves awareness of punctuation, thought process, and consonant and vowel sounds. Voice and Speech training comes during the second of the four years of acting training in Post Theatre Company's four year BFA performance curriculum. Once I handed the actors their text, I had them go through it and highlight all of the punctuation, nouns, and when ideas shifted in the piece. Identifying the punctuation helps to see where the thought process is, identifying nouns helps the actor identify the main themes that are being communicated, and idea shifts help the actor see the dynamics in the text as a whole. I noticed that once my actors are able to develop a relationship with these components they were able to make the text their own and build a confident well-crafted piece.

Bethany Yellowtail

In this experience of developing my first directed piece of theatre, I found that the process ran smoothly. There was never a moment where I had the feeling that everything was going to crash and burn. The one time I was caught off guard was toward the end when we

decided to cut one of the verbatim pieces. One of the verbatim pieces that I had selected was about the experience of Bethany Yellowtail, who is a Native American fashion designer. Bethany's verbatim piece was taken from an interview that she did with *Good Company* magazine, and in the interview she gives a personal anecdote about the lack of Native American representation in popular media and the fashion industry. She recalls the moment where she saw another fashion line steal her Native designs when she saw them on the runway in 2015. She explains, "I felt gutted. It wasn't just like someone stealing your art--it felt like a personal attack on my family, my community, and it was that feeling of being invisible again" (Kehler 2). I picked this piece for Zachary Villa after learning from his questionnaire that he was Native American. I found the piece before I actually knew Zach was Native American; it was one of many pieces that I gathered before we began the process. After reading Zach's questionnaire it seemed right that it be his piece.

I was privileged that I got to work on this piece with Zach. Watching him connect with it every rehearsal allowed him to open up as an artist and give voice to his experience being Native American. This oppressed community is barely seen in popular media unlike other minorities. Working on this piece educated me that this perspective's story must be told with great care and sophistication, and because of that, we ended up cutting the piece from the pool of verbatim piece selections. It did not fully serve the piece to have it exist alongside an improv-form. The main function of the *Armando* is to create improvised scenes inspired from a story, and through discussion we found that using Bethany's story as an anchor in which scenes would be inspired would be insensitive. Part of Bethany's piece talks about the horror she felt when she saw her stolen family designs on the runway. Since the nature of the *Armando* is to "steal" details from

someone's story to make content of your own, putting it in the *Vermando* would almost parallel what Bethany went through when her work was stolen.

When it was brought to my attention that it could be disrespectful to use Bethany's piece in the *Vermando*, it was the first time in this process that I felt short-sighted as a director. My intention with having Zach do Bethany's piece was to give voice to a minority that has very little representation. I didn't think carefully enough of the possibilities that could manifest from having a primarily white cast improvise off of a Native American piece, and as foolish as I felt in absence of thought, I learned a lot from this moment. There are so many details that go into creating a performance piece and I think it's vital in the future to make sure to handle any racially charged material in my directing career with more meticulous care and awareness of my own privilege and bias. The foolish feeling will forever be ingrained in me and I will use it to remind myself of the sophistication and care that must be used when communicating any human being's personal life experiences.

Eating Garbage Graciously: The Vermando in Performance

Once the verbatim pieces were meticulously looked over in the context of *The Armando*, during the dress rehearsal we started bringing them into performance. The verbatim pieces for the performances were picked through a movement piece that opened the show. On the night of the performances, the house manager had an audience member pick from a small white garbage bag, which contained each name of each verbatim piece. The names that were written were simply the names of the people who originated the verbatim piece. For example, Morgan's verbatim piece for Marilyn Monroe simply said, "Marilyn Monroe". Each verbatim piece was written on a crumpled up piece of white construction paper so that it looked like a piece of

“garbage”. When the house manager gave their opening speech about emergency entrances and exits, they asked for an audience volunteer to come onstage and chose the verbatim piece that would be performed that night. Once the audience member picked the piece, the house manager instructed the audience member to throw the garbage piece (verbatim piece) into a garbage can that was set up center stage. None of the cast knew each other’s pieces so after they performed their verbatim monologue, they got to watch their verbatim monologue extrapolated and improvised along with the audience.

In order for the cast to practice the format of the show without using up their performance-ready verbatim pieces in rehearsal, we practiced doing improv sets to a rehearsal verbatim piece. The rehearsal verbatim pieces consisted of verbatim pieces that I found at the beginning of the process and were potential pieces for my actors but didn’t end up getting used. For example, on the first day of rehearsal when I was giving Zach Villa his verbatim pieces he originally had three pieces to pick from. These three pieces included: Jon Bellion, Bethany Yellowtail, and Shane Dawson. Out of these three piece he ended up choosing Jon Bellion and Bethany Yellowtail, so we used the Shane Dawson piece in rehearsal.

Since in the *Armando* format there is one person who is the monologist, in my performance, the person whose verbatim piece was selected would serve as the monologist, and not partake in the improv part of that night’s performance. With this in mind, I rehearsed the actors to improvise in sets of four knowing that was the structure of the performance. Since it was possible for each actor’s verbatim piece to be performed, we did five rehearsal sets of the *Vermando* where each actor read a practice verbatim piece so that we could practice every possible four-person combination. In the *Vermando* practice sessions, I would select who was

going to read the practice verbatim piece by announcing that actor's name after the opening.

Then that actor would step forward and I would hand them the text of a random verbatim piece that didn't belong to anyone. That person would then simply read the verbatim piece off of a sheet of paper and rest of the cast would listen, knowing that they would have to improvise scenes off of its content. When the verbatim performer finished their piece, they simply moved to the side and the rest of the cast improvised scenes based off of the verbatim piece they just heard.

The Opening

In addition to running practice verbatim pieces, halfway through the process we decided to add an opening that would reveal which verbatim piece was being performed that performance. Originally, I didn't think I would have an opening piece as a part of my thesis. I thought the house manager would get an audience member to select a verbatim piece and we would dive straight into performing it. In rehearsal, I assigned an exercise to the cast to devise a movement piece: the prompt was to make a devised piece, based off of the name of my thesis, *Eating Garbage Graciously*. In the prompt, I asked them what *Eating Garbage Graciously* means to them. For me personally, it's learning how to fail in a dignified way. The idea is that I can embrace my failures in my performance career and my life and use those failures to further myself, rather than decrease my self-worth. Along with this question, the prompt asked that the cast use music, group movement, and spoken text to create the piece. I did this exercise in the summer of 2017 when I studied at iO Chicago (ImprovOlympic) This exercise is useful because it helps build an ensemble even though creating a devised piece is something that is prepared and

rehearsed. After I saw what my cast had created by themselves I had no doubts about this process being successful.

The beautiful moment that I had while watching my cast perform a piece they created, made me want to make that piece the opening of the performance. I spent a rehearsal trying to refine the piece so that its message would be clearer to an audience, but my cleaning didn't help the piece. Within the next couple days we ended up scrapping it. The confidence that was displayed during the first showing faded when I tried shaping it. I felt the pressure to keep the original piece's structure because the first showing had been a profound moment for me as a director. I guess we sort of "Ate Garbage Graciously" at this point in the process. We failed at making the original piece work so we scrapped it and used what we learned from it to make something new. With the creation of the new opening movement piece, we started by working with an idea that the actors found in the creation of the first movement piece. The text used in the first piece was the saying, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." The cast found this text when they were exploring the prompt question, "What does *Eating Garbage Graciously* mean to you?" so "One man's trash is another man's treasure" is how my actors interpreted what *Eating Garbage Graciously* means to them. My production lab advisor, Valerie Clayman Pye, came into this rehearsal and helped us with moving on to the next version of the piece, and an image that stuck out to her was the idea of pieces of trash being passed around to all the actors and the actors entering the space in a spiral shape.

We started to create the piece off of "One man's trash is another man's treasure" and the image of the spiral shape. I had a little anxiety as a director in working on this piece with the cast. I only had to clean the movement piece the first time, this time I actually had to stage it

which was something I didn't think I would end up doing. We ended up developing a piece where each actor wore a different color. Zach wore blue, Irene wore orange, Morgan wore yellow, Yaya wore Red, and Lauren wore green. My piece was light-hearted, whimsical, and joyful so having my cast dress in the colors of the rainbow catered to the piece's overall tone. Along with each of them wearing a different color, they also had piece of construction paper that matched the color they wore.

The final product of the opening took three steps. As the stage lights came up, Jack Johnson's song *Upside Down* played and the actors entered in a line while examining their construction paper, their arms were bent at 90 degrees and the paper was parallel to each actor's mouth. Center stage was a garbage can that all the actors walked in a circle around. Zach was the first person to enter the stage, so once Zach got towards the end of his circle around the garbage can he crumpled his blue paper and threw it into the garbage can. In a chain reaction from the order in which they entered, each actor after Zach crumpled their piece of paper and threw it into the garbage can. After each actor threw their colored construction paper in the garbage, they each had a different place on stage that served as their own color zone. Once the actors got to their individual spots, they showed their discomfort with their color non-verbally either by adapting their body's physicality or changing their facial expressions. Each actor stuck to their own place on the stage until the lyrics of the song started and then the actors extended their eye contact to each other fully taking in the group as a whole. Eventually, each actor's eye contact shifted inward back to themselves and their personal discomfort in their color.

The next step in the movement piece consisted of Zach deciding to try on new colors. He walked to each actor, analyzed them, and he showed his analysis by physically assuming each

actor's posture—almost like he was trying them on. He did this until he stopped at Morgan, whose color was yellow. His interaction with Morgan was different from his interactions with everyone else. He was fascinated by Morgan and her color. When I directed Zach I told him to look at her as if she's the most fascinating creature he's ever seen. After he did this, Zach ran back to the garbage can and took Morgan's original crumpled yellow construction paper, un-crumpled it, and started examining it. He brought Morgan's color back to his original spot but he no longer showed any discontent, he was fascinated by his new piece of paper. After this, one by one the actors started to go to the garbage can and pick another actor's color. As Zach took Morgan's original yellow paper, she took his original blue paper. Lauren took Yaya's original red paper, Yaya took Irene's original orange paper, and Irene took Lauren's original green paper.

The final step was once everyone has grabbed their new color, all at once, they passed their pieces of paper around the circle so that all the different colors were circulating through the group. Eventually, the colors were passed multiple times until Morgan ended up getting her original color: yellow. Each of the actors were left with a color that was different than their original, except Morgan. At this point, Morgan broke away from the circle that the group had created with passing the paper, and displayed unhappiness that she was left with her original color. She took a second to look at her paper, and she got the idea to go back to the garbage can and see if there were any other colors left. At the bottom of the garbage she found the crumpled verbatim piece that the audience member picked. To conclude the opening piece, She un-crumpled the paper and read it which revealed which verbatim piece was performed that night.

The Verbatim Piece Reveal

I felt restless and so did my cast during the reveal of the verbatim piece during the performances. For the past four weeks, these five actors had been working intricately on two contrasting monologues. I believe it was essential to have 10 pieces in order to insure that the improvisation had the potential in being as varied as possible. All of the layers that went into this process such as the improv training, the verbatim work, and the movement piece made this moment filled with anticipation. Maybe I'm biased because this is my own creation, but this moment was unlike any other moment in theatre I've ever experienced. There was absolutely no likelihood that all of the verbatim pieces would be performed because there were only five shows. I developed a love for every piece over the course of working on them. It was nice to have a fondness for all of the pieces because I wasn't ever worried that a bad one would be picked, and it was hard for me to come to terms with the idea that 5 amazing pieces would never be in an actual performance of *Eating Garbage Graciously*.

This reveal of the verbatim piece was exhilarating to experience. This moment may have only been this way for the people working on the project, or the people educated on it, but every person a part of this piece shared an automatic group energy once the verbatim piece was revealed. There were definitely people in the audience who had no idea what was going on and some probably thought that the improv was scripted work. For the people who were a part of the process, this moment was what all of our work had led up to. For four weeks these actors had built a close relationship as an ensemble through all the improv work they'd done. When they weren't having group rehearsal they would be in a room across the hall doing research and memorizing. It was challenging for them to keep their verbatim pieces secret from one another

because they were all working closely to each other. For the verbatim acting work, I rehearsed each actor by themselves with only me and the stage manager in the room so we were the only people who knew what all the verbatim pieces were. When Morgan uncrumpled the verbatim piece it was a nerve-wracking, yet joyful experience for the actors. The moment is much like Christmas morning. You know that there are wondrous delights beneath the wrapping paper but you have a bit of anxiety because you don't know exactly what those delights are. Each piece had a 10% chance of being chosen on the first night of performances and that percentage decreased after each performance. Once a verbatim piece was picked, it could no longer be used again because the improv wouldn't be authentic. Each piece could only go once so that the show would be a different show every performance.

Conclusion

Overall this process was the most joyful and warm process that I've been a part of through all of the collegiate theatre processes I've been through. Each *Vermando* that the cast performed was perfect in its own way because the nature of it was different every time. The verbatim piece was different every time, which made the improvisation different every time, and because of this, *Eating Garbage Graciously* enabled people to see how improv is not just for comedic content but for exploring content of all theatrical genres. Even though I tried to manipulate the number of verbatim pieces so that it wouldn't be predictable, everyone in the cast ended up having a chance to perform one of their verbatim pieces amidst the 4 performances and 1 dress rehearsal. This was okay though because all of the actor's pieces were different from one another. The cast and I were happy with this turnout because each cast member got the experience of seeing one of their verbatim pieces used in the *Vermando*. With the success with

this project, I can definitely see myself directing a *Vermando* again and also creating and directing more improv pieces. I never thought I would enjoy teaching but I definitely have found a passion in coaching and directing improv. To me improv is magic. Theatre is incredible and improv definitely fits under the umbrella of theatre, but the art-form of improv has made theatre better for me. Improv is a true constant in my life that continuously keeps me happy, challenged, and mentally sane.

To me, *Eating Garbage Graciously* means learning how to embrace failure with a wide smile and this phrase is the mantra of my performance career. I see failure as something that is terrifying but it is also something that is inevitable if you are exposing yourself to new experiences. I believe there are a lot of people that say failing in life is good but they never explain the necessary steps that one needs to take to recover from failure or how they can potentially use their failure to further themselves. For example Walt Disney says, “Everyone falls down. Getting back up is how you learn to walk” (Gabler 77). I think Disney meant this metaphorically, but what is wrong with staying “fallen down” for a while? I think it’s important to move on from failure, but I think in order to do that you need to spend time getting comfortable in it. I think there is joy to be found in enduring one’s failure. Failure isn’t something that someone expects or aims for so I think it should be looked at as one would look at a happy accident. My inner mantra is “you wanted this to happen and then this other thing happened so take advantage”. The experience of failure forces you to endure the thing that you didn’t want. I think failure enables you to experience different point of views and different mindsets. Part of the joy I take away from improv and theatre is that I have the ability to play whatever character I want and get into different mindsets. Learning how to fail in improv has

made me experience failure on a regular basis. When making up content on the spot failure is bound to happen. I have failed so much on a regular basis in improv that it's become part of who I am. When one suppresses their failure and just moves on, they're missing out on an important moment to learn about themselves. I've learned through failure not only what I consider failure, but also what I consider success is.

On Jimmy Carrane's podcast, *Improv Nerd*, Carrane interviews Rachael Mason who is the director of long-form improvisation at Second City Chicago. In this interview Rachael explains how building a career in comedy and improv is the act of learning how to, "eat shit graciously" (Mason 32 min). I decided to take this quote and twist it by changing "shit" to "garbage", but I've also taken this metaphor and defined it for myself. *Eating Garbage Graciously* is how I sum up what I've learned through my improv and college career. I was a completely different person than the person I was before I came to college and started improvising. I think I am fortunate to have had my personal epiphany as an artist at such a young age. Finding improv is the best thing that could have happened to me as an artist. Through this process I've learned not only that improv is my passion, but I'm passionate about teaching it. I believe that improv should be a fundamental part of BFA actor training because it allows for actors to be flexible. I want to educate performers on the benefits of improv in theatre performance more so than I want to build an acting career for myself. "*Eating Garbage Graciously*" is a piece and motto that I'm going to take into my life after college. Pursuing a career in acting is a difficult endeavor with little stability, but regardless of that, I love what I do. The rest of my career will be spent finding ways to use the acceptance of failure I've learned in

improv into every part of my career as an actor. So yes, I will be “Eating Garbage Graciously” for the rest of my life, but I’m more than willing to do so.

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Questionnaire

Eating [Garbage] Graciously Q & A (Elise's Thesis)

1. Who do you consider to be some of your famous idols? This can include famous actors, socialites, artists, comedians, political figures, etc. What have they done or said that makes them your idol? How do they connect to you and your personal interests?
1. What are some of your favorite podcasts or interview-oriented shows? Is there a specific podcast episode you like? What topics do they explore and why do you like it? Is there a specific interview out there that you love? (For example, when Ellen interviewed Kevin Hart over the oscar controversy, when Oprah interviewed Aids crisis victims in 1987, etc.)
1. What do you want to gain as a performer/theatre artist from working on this project? Would you like to stretch yourself? Or would you like to use this process to refine skills that you've already worked on?
1. How do you feel about Improvisation? What are your fears? Your joys? What do you think you might need to work on in you improvisation?
1. If you've never improvised before or have little experience, what is your experience? What scares you? What excites you?
1. What kind of ethnicity or culture do you identify with? Do you consider your ethnicity to be a big part of your personal identity?
1. Or is there any subject matter and characters you would like to stay away from? Is there anything I need to know about you personally that you would like to share?

Director's Note

Improv improved my life because it taught me how to fail. When I learned that going up on stage with only my mind, body, and another person was all I needed, I realized that my own determination to “get things right” got in the way of me being present with myself. “Eating Garbage Graciously,” comes from that. Failing Dignified. The foundation of this quote comes from a podcast interview with Rachael Mason from The Second City Chicago; she says, “You have to go through a lot of rejection and experience before you can get to the point where you can put up your own show. You have to Eat Shit Graciously.” Well, the word “shit” didn’t roll off my tongue quite enough for me to include it in my thesis, but this advice stuck with me.

Through my improv training, I’ve learned to embrace all my failures with a wide smile. I believe the sooner people learn to embrace their flaws and “the garbage” parts of themselves, the sooner they will find self-happiness and learn how to define their own success. My time studying improv in Chicago helped to remove a level of stress that I never knew I carried into every part of my life. Improv unleashed the funny, messy, positive person who I am today.

Through my improv studies, I’ve met and improvised with artists from all over the world. I have friends from Australia, Poland, England, China, Singapore, Peru, Germany, Lithuania, Denmark, etc. from studying improv. Being exposed to people from diverse cultures made me realize how ignorant I had been about the world outside of the United States. In just having lunch

with my classmates, I was able to learn about their ways of life and that's when I realized that improv serves not only as an outlet to combat anxiety, but also as a melting pot for different cultures and points of view to come together. With my piece, *Eating Garbage Graciously*, I wanted to combine improvisation and also give voice to points of view that people might not think about. My piece is a hybrid of Verbatim Theatre and the long-form improv format "The Armando" ("Vermando", if you will). In a typical Armando, there's a person who improvises a monologue supported by a team of improvisers. Once the monologist finishes their monologue, the improvisers perform scenes inspired from the details they took from the monologist's piece. In this piece, we replace the improvised monologue with prepared verbatim pieces that each cast member has rehearsed independently. None of the cast knows each other's pieces so they will get to watch their verbatim monologue extrapolated and improvised along with the audience.

I want people to leave this piece feeling like they have been exposed to points of view that they never expected to experience, and that improv can be just as engaging with serious material as it is with comedic material. Improv is an art-form that many actors don't prioritize because people don't understand how meaningful it is. If there's a single thing I want people to take away from this piece it's that you're going to have to eat a lot of garbage in life, and improv teaches people to eat their garbage graciously. When you discover that what you thought was "waste" isn't a waste at all, you can rise above the residue and live graciously.

Production Images



Production Poster



Director Biography

Elise is originally from Des Moines, Iowa and is excited to finish off her senior year on Long Island by directing her thesis with this amazing team! Elise is an “Improviser first” and has studied at Improv Theatres all over the country including The Second City, The Magnet, iO Chicago, and The Annoyance. In Fall 2017, she was seen performing as Antipholus of Ephesus in The Comedy of Errors at PTC and in the following spring she was Williamson in PTC’s all-female version of Glengarry Glen Ross. She is the current president and founding member of E.S.T.A ‘s Improv Troupe No Control, and this past Fall Elise assistant directed PTC’s Improv show TBD. When Elise graduates she intends to pursue a career in comedic acting, improvisation, being a garbage can, and also wants to spread her love and Improv wisdom all over the world!